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WALTER BENN MICHAELS

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The Beauty of a Social Problem - Interview with Walter Benn Michaels

By Thomas Roach

Thomas Roach: I'll lift questions from WJT Mitchell to begin: Who are you? What do you do? What crucial facts in your background would you mention if you were introducing yourself to a stranger on an airplane?

Walter Benn Michaels: So I pretty much keep to myself on airplanes but I guess the relevant facts about me are that I teach in the English Department at UIC and that, in addition to writing about literature and literary theory, I write about politics and art. And in politics, I'm an orthodox Reedian (Adolph); in aesthetics, an orthodox Friedian (Michael).

TR: You wrote recently: "If what you want is a vision of the structures that produce both the policies we've got and the desire for alternatives to them, art is almost the only place you can find it." Why do contemporary practices in photography interest you specifically? Or, why is photography the exemplar?

WBM: The main thing that's drawn me to photography has just been that for most of my looking-at-art lifetime, much of the most ambitious and exciting work has been made by photographers or artists with a strong connection to photography. Of course, there's been lots of meretricious and boring work too (that's inevitable) but, starting with Jim Welling's work in the early 80s, so many of the things that have just blown me away have been photographs. And one reason for that, I think, has been photography's centrality as a site for thinking about a particular set of theoretical questions that have turned out also be important political questions: the role of the artist in determining the work's meaning, the role of the reader or beholder, the relation of the work to the world

Of course these questions matter for every art. But it's not hard to see their particular salience for photography. The fact, for instance, that you can make a picture just by pressing a button on the camera can easily be understood to raise questions about the relative demands of skill and concept, or about how tight the relation between the artist's intentions and the picture's meaning can be, or even (something I'm writing about right now) about what exactly an intention or an intentional act is.

And, precisely because the photographer's contribution to the meaning of the work can come to seem attenuated, the beholder's can come to be accentuated. The most vivid

early example was obviously Barthes's punctum – the insistence on what the beholder felt regardless of or despite whatever the photographer might have meant. And, of course, that distinctive appeal to the viewer is linked to the photograph's distinctive relation to what it's a photo of. Just to choose an artist I haven't written about but whose work I'm interested in, if you look at LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographs of Braddock PA, there's a kind of non-identity between how we respond to the subjects of those photographs and how we respond to the photographs as art. One depends on how we feel about de-industrialization, racialized poverty, etc.; it's about us. The other depends on how we understand what Frazier is trying to do with these pictures; it's about art. So the indexical relation of the photograph to its subject generates a certain appeal of the photograph to its beholder's subjectivity. But the photographs' claim to be art demands a response that, while it is routed through the indexical – routed through our response to the plight of the people the photos depict-- is fundamentally different from it.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby and U.P.M.C Braddock Hospital on Braddock Avenue*, 2007. Gelatin silver photograph, 20 x 25 in. Courtesy of the artist © LaToya Ruby Frazier.

TR: What you're describing here are mainly aesthetic issues but you write about them as if they were also political issues. Is it overly simplistic to describe your interests as "Aesthetic Autonomy vs. Political Autonomy"?

WBM: Well, you're dead on about autonomy. What I was just describing about the photo's relation to the world and to the beholder suggests the ways in which the (straight) photograph or the photogram – with its causal dependence on what it's a photo of and hence its openness to the different responses

different viewers will have to the sight of (say) deindustrializing Braddock -- is maybe the least autonomous art object imaginable. But what I've been interested in is photographers who both acknowledge and seek to overcome this structural openness, who seek to establish the autonomy of the work. What they're producing is works that insist on a meaning that's independent of and even indifferent to the response of the viewer. And while that's obviously an aesthetic project, I argue that it's also a political project, and, today, a very particular kind of political project -- not liberal but left, organized around neither individuality nor identity but the concept of class.

TR: Are the artists you describe in *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (2015) – Evans, Wall, Binschtok, Chang, Deschenes, Ou – protesting a set of aesthetic structures analogous to class?

WBM: I don't think they're protesting anything but I do think they have a class aesthetic, whether or not they have a class politics (which some do and some don't). Today, the core of liberal (or neoliberal, not much difference) politics is the effort to make capitalism fairer, to minimize the role played by racism, sexism, etc. in depriving people of the ability to succeed in the market. And what that effort requires is precisely a kind of attention to and appreciation of both identity and individuality -- who people are, how we see each other and treat each other. A kind of ethics. But the work of artists like Binschtok and Chang and Ou (as least as I understand them) is not interested in and in fact refuses those kinds of relations. It's interested instead in its own structure, its own logic (that's part of what's meant by autonomy). So what we see in their work is a world that does not depend on how we see or feel about it. And it's that world that provides us an image of our own, of a society structured by the logic of labor and capital, not by how capitalists feel about workers. By exploitation, not by unfairness or a failure of compassion. In this way, what amounts to an aesthetics of indifference finds its use also as a politics of indifference. It's an aesthetics and a politics instead of an ethics.

TR: Re-enactment interests you. You describe the points at which blankness and generalization are necessary for convincing reenactment – you use Tom McCarthy's hockey mask wearing actors in *Remainder* (2005) as an example. I'm reminded of an anecdote of Charles Ray's related to *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997) – his meticulous casting of a Pontiac Grand Am death-wreck in fiberglass. He describes the frustrating failure of the project until he began filling and smoothing between the cast parts with Bondo. He describes Bondo as a cinematic fade between scenes, interstitial filler between the perfectly reproduced component parts without which the copy, somehow, failed. It was a baffling problem for him... that he would need Bondo, that an indexical process like casting would fail to convincingly copy a thing without the addition of a material not present in the original.

WBM: There's a lot in that question! In Ray, of course, what's partly at stake in making the copy is transforming the object (made by nature, like *Hinoki* or by chance – literally accident – like *Unpainted Sculpture*) into the bearer of the artist's intentions. In *Remainder*, intentionality is approached a little more obliquely. What re-enactment does is instantaneously produce normativity – you're not just walking down a hallway, you're walking down a hallway that either does or doesn't look like it's supposed to. So the

whole point of McCarthy's re-enactor is that he's obsessed with getting it right and that when he does get it right he feels the "tingling" of what he calls "significance." Which is to say, meaning. Just as Ray produces meaning by making chance into intention, McCarthy's re-enactor produces meaning by making a hallway into the representation of a hallway. And what's crucial about the blank is not so much that it makes the representation more convincing but that, like the space demarcated by a frame, it functions to mark the conceptual difference between material that means and material that doesn't.

TR: So that's what you're getting at when you write "it's only abstraction – the blankness that turns something (a hockey mask, paper, cement) into a representation of nothing – that makes the very idea of remainder possible"? And, to paraphrase, that with this renouncement of thingness, with this use of a concrete material as 'a nothing' we somehow rehabilitate the material itself for use. How do Phil Chang's unfixed *Cache*, *Active* works rehabilitate or affirm representation by virtue of their slide into monochromes?

WBM: Because the *Cache*, *Active* works are pictures that, once you expose them to the light immediately begin to turn into monochromes, they might be thought to do exactly the opposite of what I'm talking about; they seem to start as representations and collapse or, I like your word, slide into the sheerly material. But since there are important ways in which photographs aren't exactly representations in the first place (that's the point of all the indexicality stuff), there's an equally important way in which the slide into materiality functions to assert that fact – to insist on a materiality that was always already there. And in that sense – the sense in which these works are not only material but are about their materiality – the slide is their way of refusing to slide, of making what looks like the disappearance of representation into a representation.

TR: Do artists like Chang make it possible for other artists to assume less fraught or even uncaring relationships with the thingness of photographs?

WBM: That's a good question. Insofar as there's an internal logic at work here, the answer might almost be that work like his, properly understood, might make it not only possible but almost necessary. To be in the room with one of the *Cache*, *Actives* while it's fading is a powerful



experience. It's like being shown the work as an epitaph for the process that made it. So maybe after that experience, a certain kind of interest in the ontology of the photograph begins to get replaced. If you look at Chang's more recent work (like on the cover of my book), you can see a slightly different direction, a different sense of what makes a photograph a photograph. Actually, you can see this tendency also in what Owen Kydd calls his durational photographs. And in Binschtok's *Clusters* and, of course, Demand's *Pacific Sun*.



TR: You compare Walker Evans' FSA pictures to Liz Deschenes' mirrored photograms. I understand the economic conditions surrounding both bodies of work are important to your analysis, but why Evans? Why not a comparison between Deschenes and say, Steiglitz's *Equivalents*? Some of these were made in the same period of extraordinary inequality. Or Moholy-Nagy's photograms? (He was in Chicago then.)

WBM: No doubt there are things you could say about Deschenes in relation to Steiglitz's *Equivalents* or Moholy-Nagy but I was drawn to the Evans because I think both his work and hers address the question of the beholder in differently revelatory ways. In the book, I try to show how Evans's ambition to make art functions to foreground the difference between the photographer and his subjects, how his effort to make art out of people who (in his and Agee's view) have no conception of art, makes the photographs address the inequality between their subjects (who don't see them as art) and their viewers (who do). So what interested me in Deschenes was that in the mirrored photograms, what we see – not sharecroppers but ourselves – eliminates that inequality, while the beauty of the works themselves – which I understand in part as producing a desire not to see our own reflections – functions to complicate that effect of identity.

More generally, I would say that while you are of course right that the economic conditions in which a work is produced seem to me important, they're not dispositive. It's the work's formal ambitions that I think function as the structure of address to those conditions. And, of course, Evans tended to be very vehement about the fact that his photographs had no politics. I don't know if Deschenes feels the same way and I don't know anything about what her politics are. So putting them together was maybe a way also of making a slightly larger point about how politics work in art.

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